



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Regional Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill

30 April 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Jimmy Spratt (Chairperson)
Mr Seán Lynch (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Joe Byrne
Mr John Dallat
Mr Alex Easton
Mrs Brenda Hale
Mr Declan McAleer
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

Witnesses:

Inspector Rosie Leech Police Service of Northern Ireland
Chief Inspector Diane Pennington Police Service of Northern Ireland

The Chairperson: I welcome Chief Inspector Diane Pennington and Inspector Rosie Leech to the Committee. I am sure that you have been at Committees before. I invite you to make a short presentation on your views of the Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill, and then leave yourselves open to questions.

Chief Inspector Diane Pennington (Police Service of Northern Ireland): Thank you, Chair.

The Chairperson: The meeting is being recorded by Hansard as it will be part and parcel of the Committee's inquiry. Everything that you say is being recorded. I want to be fair and give you that warning.

Chief Inspector Pennington: Thank you, Chair.

The Chairperson: We will not use it against you, by the way.

Chief Inspector Pennington: Our understanding is that the private Member's Bill is seeking to reduce the speed limits on all urban unclassified roads in Northern Ireland from 30 mph to 20 mph. The basic intent is to capture residential roads in that categorisation. However, although the police welcome any move or any change that has the intention and the effect of reducing casualties on our roads, we are slightly concerned about the blanket approach proposed in the Bill to do it on all unclassified roads. Although it captures residential roads, it also captures some through roads. One of the roads that has come to our notice is Botanic Avenue in Belfast, which has a mixed economy of residential and commercial properties, but it is a busy thoroughfare that is used for getting from one end of Belfast to the other.

Two types of 20 mph schemes are in use in Northern Ireland in line with what operates in the rest of the UK. We have 20 mph zones, where physical engineering measures are put in place to reduce the speed of the traffic on a road. We have seen that in places such as the Donegall Road and Bloomfield Avenue, where you have rumble strips, chicanes, red-line markings and the dreaded speed bumps. The other scheme is the 20 mph limit, which is controlled mainly by signage; three pilot schemes have been operating in Northern Ireland recently at schools. Those are part-time schemes, and we understand that five further schemes will be introduced across the Province shortly.

Current opinion is that the engineering solutions are not ideal. They do reduce speed on the roads on which they are introduced, but there are downsides. They are expensive to install and maintain; there is the difficulty that they would create for emergency vehicles that need access to those roads at any time of day or night; and communities have reported to us that it is very noisy living on a road where those measures are in place, particularly speed bumps. Some bumps have been removed in certain areas; for example, the speed bumps were removed from the harbour estate, because they were causing damage to heavy goods vehicles.

The Police Service is always trying to move towards a self-enforcing speed limit. We would prefer something that does not use physical measures for the reasons that I have outlined and something where drivers are aware of the speed on the road and will reduce and restrict their limit accordingly. We are guided by the Association of Chief Police Officers speed enforcement policy guidelines, which I think you all have had sight of. The guidelines contain the guidance and protocols by which police services across the UK should enforce speed. The document contains some key points, and the main point for us about introducing any speed limit on any road is the look and feel of the road. You might hear people say that a road looks like a 40 mph road or that it feels like a 30 mph road. It is the sense that you get of the speed that you should be doing as you drive along a road, and that is done in conjunction with our colleagues in Roads Service when a road is being constructed. It is the topography of the road, the sight lines, and the way in which the junctions are constructed, and all that is put into place so that drivers will enforce themselves to keep to the speed limit.

The desired outcome is safer roads. We do not want high speeds, and we do not want to have to carry out lots of enforcement. The roads should be able to be self-enforcing. That is particularly key for a road on which we would look to introduce a 20 mph limit. We feel that generally — and this is the experience in the rest of the United Kingdom — these limits are in place on roads in residential areas. In fact, the strapline on the 20's Plenty For Us campaign, which is active in a couple of areas in Northern Ireland as well as across the UK, is "20's Plenty Where People Live". It is geared towards residential areas. A driver who is driving through that area will live in the area, and their children will play and go to school in it. Those drivers will know about vulnerable road users, such as elderly people walking to the shops. That will make them feel that driving at 20 mph is more appropriate than driving at 30 mph. That would not be the case in Botanic Avenue, where you would not get that feel and it would not be the case that, most of the time, it is local people who are driving on that road and self-enforcing.

One of our main concerns with the proposals in the private Member's Bill is that it is a blanket approach to all unclassified roads. We would prefer to follow the model that this is a bottom-up approach; that there is a demand coming from the community, primarily in residential areas, for the speed limit to be lowered; that they are driving at lower limits already; that speed surveys in these areas show that they are driving closer to 20 mph than 30 mph anyway; and that there is broad community support for that change. That will mean that the area will self-enforce and that there should not be a high incidence of non-compliance and a high demand for the police to enforce.

Another thing that we are worried about is that, when the police have to enforce such speed limits, it is seen as excessive and over the top. That affects the confidence and the support that we, as the police, get from the public.

That is our main issue with the terms described in the Bill. We feel that this should not be a blanket approach. We are more than happy to support proposals that come in case by case, that can be looked at properly, that are in residential areas and which are not likely to leave us in the unenviable position of having to enforce it, quite possibly for years to come.

The Chairperson: Thank you. I will start with a question — I said "a" question, members. First, did the police respond to the consultation on the private Member's Bill? What impact would this legislation have on PSNI resources? Have you, as a service, done any calculations as to how much the 20 mph speed limit would cost the PSNI in enforcement etc?

Inspector Rosie Leech (Police Service of Northern Ireland): Yes; we responded officially to the consultation. We highlighted the issues that the Chief Inspector has covered, namely that we feel that a blanket approach would cause an excessive enforcement burden. I do not believe that we have done any calculations of the likely effect that it would have. However, quite naturally, it would divert attention away from other roads where the national speed limit is in place. Our focus has been on trying to direct our enforcement and resources to the areas where it is clear that collisions are happening and injuries are being sustained. That is the model that we are working to.

The Chairperson: On the issues around enforcement on specific streets where there is a problem with accidents, I assume that you have a good relationship with the Department and Roads Service in coming up with resolutions and physical measures. Do you have an input into that?

Chief Inspector Pennington: Yes, we do. We have officers across the Province whose role as traffic management officers is to work in partnership with Roads Service colleagues on problem solving and all aspects of road safety and to be involved in the engineering solutions. Rosie and I are both involved in various groups and committees at a higher, more strategic, level.

The Chairperson: And that is effective.

Chief Inspector Pennington: Absolutely. The only way for this to work is in partnership; the police cannot do it alone. I think that Roads Service would say exactly the same.

Mr Lynch: Thank you for your presentation. I have just one question. When we were in Edinburgh, we talked to authorities there. Have you had any engagement with Edinburgh or Bristol about the enforcement or policing of this issue?

Chief Inspector Pennington: We have not as yet because this has not been progressed that far yet, but we could certainly learn from our colleagues in those areas. I would not like to anticipate what they would say, but the guidance that governs us nationally is very clear that road speed limits should be set appropriately. In fact, the guidance says that, where the limit is not set appropriately, it is not for the police to enforce it and that it is for the relevant authority — the district council in GB and Roads Service here — to try to solve that issue. It is all about preventing speeding rather than detecting it.

Mr Easton: Thanks for your presentation. Is there a blanket 20 mph speed limit in residential areas in the rest of the UK?

Chief Inspector Pennington: No.

Mr Easton: If you had to, could you enforce a blanket 20 mph speed limit in residential areas in Northern Ireland?

Chief Inspector Pennington: In all residential areas?

Mr Easton: Yes; could you enforce that?

Chief Inspector Pennington: It would be challenging.

Mr Easton: Very challenging?

Chief Inspector Pennington: Yes, I would say so. I do not know the number of kilometres of roads, but it would certainly be challenging as regards resources. We would always prefer —

The Chairperson: Four thousand six hundred kilometres.

Chief Inspector Pennington: Thank you, Chair. We operate on a national intelligence model for everything that we do, including how we deploy our resources for road-policing issues. Speed detection is one of those issues. We go where the problem is and where the priority is. We would rather see those matters decided case by case where each suggestion can be properly analysed. However, the real key is community buy-in. The community in which the speed limit is to be changed

must support it. That is how it operates in GB. With the district council setting the speed limit, in general, the local community will petition the local council. The council will then carry out speed surveys to determine the average speed. What should happen is that the average speed will be closer to 20 mph than 30 mph, which will show that that would be an appropriate place to put that in.

Mr Easton: Do you envisage local council men enforcing it?

The Chairperson: Alex, you are slipping away from my earlier advice.

Mr Easton: That is the last one.

Chief Inspector Pennington: It is set by Roads Service here, so it is a different model.

Mr Dallat: Diane, if I picked you up right, you prefer to work on a case-by-case basis.

Chief Inspector Pennington: Yes.

Mr Dallat: Is that not what got us to the hotchpotch that we have?

Chief Inspector Pennington: In what sense?

Mr Dallat: In the sense that you have awfully nice neighbourhoods that have lobby groups and road safety committees and get very good gateway treatment and very good bumps and all the rest of it, while working-class housing estates are left to suffer the inconvenience of speeding cars all over the place.

Inspector Leech: It is not for me to answer for how Roads Service's policies work. However, the five pilot sites have been selected with a view to going into more challenging, or "working-class", areas, as you describe them, to put in those schemes and see how they are accepted and how the public there reacts. One will be created in north Belfast and another in Derry. I think that we will get a wide sense of how those communities regard the schemes and accept them.

Mr Dallat: You said that you were worried about the police having to go "over the top". What does that mean?

Chief Inspector Pennington: I think that the perception from local communities could be that we are —

Mr Dallat: Offending the motorist?

Chief Inspector Pennington: Yes; that we are there more often than we should be.

Mr Dallat: Diane, have you not got past that? Are we not on a campaign to "unbag" neighbourhoods for the people who live in them?

The Chairperson: Of course, it could be local residents whom you could be offending.

Chief Inspector Pennington: It is interesting that you say that, Chair. Do you want to comment on that, Rosie?

Inspector Leech: That is the sort of thing that happens. It is not isolated. We respond to community concerns and go into areas to carry out enforcement at the request of locals, only to find that the people who are complaining are among our customers whom we then catch.

We absolutely want to bring speeds down and to have a significant impact on speed-related collisions through our enforcement, but we cannot do that everywhere at the same time. We need to direct it to where demand and need are greatest.

As a person on the receiving end of the complaints and the letters of mitigation that motorists make, I know that, frequently, comments are made such as, "That road just did not look like a 30 mph or 40

mph limit, "I cannot believe that is what the speed limit was" or "It just did not feel like that." That is common among drivers, and we have to bear it in mind. You cannot avoid it or get away from it.

We have been trying. We have been enforcing for years and have done speed awareness courses with motorists who are caught at the lower end of the offending spectrum. We are only now slowly starting to make an impact in that regard and are allowing motorists to appreciate that they need to look for the signage and that the environment is important.

Mr Dallat: Finally — I get carried away a little bit by this — I recently walked around Anniesland on the Great Western Road in Glasgow. For the first time in a lifetime, I felt absolutely safe. Why? Because they have a 20's Plenty scheme in place there and there is a partnership between the local community and everyone else.

I do not think that reacting to something and dealing with it on a case-by-case basis got us to where we are now. We have made marvellous achievements, but we are pressed for time.

The Chairperson: Yes, we are. For the purposes of clarity for the Hansard report, the PSNI does not decide whether ramps and measures are placed in an area. The Department does that, and that needs to be made very clear in respect of the comments that have been made.

Mr Ó hOisín: Thanks for your presentation. That was the point that I was going to make, Chair.

Although the traffic management officers work very well with DRD officials, our experience, as elected Members, particularly when we were looking at specific cases, is that the criteria seem to be set quite high. You need either a significant usage or a significant accident history to be able to access anything at all. There is a requirement for traffic-calming measures in new developments, be they bumps, bollards or chicanes, but in older developments and in other places that simply does not happen, and it proves very difficult for us or anybody else to get anything done. People say that you need a fatality before something is done, and, unfortunately, that is often the case.

Can work be done to examine the criteria? Without getting into details, I know of one constituency where three schools are beside one another but do not match the 1,000-trips-a-day criteria required for anything to be put in, including flashing lights. Can work be done there between, say, the police and DRD officials?

Inspector Leech: DRD officials would say that they have a pot of money that they have to allocate where they see the highest success being. That is what we come up against. Equally, we get complaints through our neighbourhood officers and we are asked whether we can bring any influence to bear. It may be a partnership, but there are times when you have to defer to your partner's position, and it is a DRD position. We will continue to represent the views of the community that seeks our support; equally, we would not expect them to tell us how to enforce. We take precedence in the enforcement arena, and the Department takes precedence in the engineering arena. As I said, we do our best, but —

Mr Ó hOisín: There is a crossover in the required criteria that both sides could feed into.

Inspector Leech: We can certainly raise the point that representations have been made at our strategic meeting with the Department.

Mr McAleer: I will be brief. Many towns throughout the North, including my own town of Omagh, have 20 mph zones. Have you an enforcement role in those areas? There are several hundred kilometres in the North that are 20 mph zones: do you have any enforcement role in those or are they all purely self-regulating?

Inspector Leech: No, they may be advisories. I do not know. A red roundel means that a speed limit is mandatory, so they would be enforceable. However, I am given to understand that we have no 20 mph limits; they are zones, which means that they are all accompanied by traffic-calming measures. We have not been approached, and we have not been enforcing those 20 mph limits.

Chief Inspector Pennington: That could mean that it is working and that the limit is being adhered to if there is no community concern being fed back to us about the need for enforcement. That is the perfect solution.

Mr McAleer: If I could ask a supplementary question, Chair: if it was brought to your attention that speeding became an issue in a housing development, would you have a legislative responsibility to enforce the 20 mph zone?

Inspector Leech: Yes, absolutely.

Chief Inspector Pennington: Yes, but we would discuss with Roads Service colleagues whether there was anything else that needed to be done about the topography of the road and the traffic-calming measures to see whether anything needed to be adjusted or added to prevent speeding. As I said before, that is what we are about. We are trying to prevent it rather than having to detect and enforce it.

Mrs Hale: With the Committee's indulgence, I will speak again about the village of Hillsborough and the Culcavy and Halftown Roads, where we were looking for the speed limit. You said that you hope that drivers self-impose limits in an area felt to be residential. Hillsborough village is residential, but it is also used as a rat run in the mornings by HGVs and cars, and it is bordered by the 30 mph signs and the red areas on the roads. Would you advocate a proactive model of speed management, in that a 20 mph zone would be imposed on roads in such an area or that chicanes would be put in? The traffic management officers there say that they can do nothing until Roads Service gives them signage. Perhaps if we had a better lobby or support from traffic management officers in that area, we might be more successful. Would you advocate a proactive, preventative speed management model rather than reactive where we wait until something happens?

Inspector Leech: Hillsborough, in particular, has a problem in that a grade-separated junction has been created at one end of the village that allows traffic to avoid the roundabout at the far end of the A1. Lorries go that way to try to avoid the bottleneck. As soon as that roundabout is sorted out, I think that Hillsborough would cease to be a rat run. That is probably the answer for Hillsborough. I am not sure that a 20 mph limit would be suitable for Hillsborough's main street.

Mrs Hale: It is. Ninety per cent of the buildings in Hillsborough are residential; only 10% are shops. It is a residential area. All the area's residential groups have bought into it. Unfortunately, however, neither the police nor the Department has.

Inspector Leech: It is certainly one of the areas that we would be happy to look at. However, there is a problem with traffic flow, and, until that problem has been solved, that is where the issue really lies. I do not think that there would be a problem in Hillsborough then.

The Chairperson: So, there is some work for the Department to do.

Inspector Leech: Sorry.

The Chairperson: I appreciate your coming along today and making such a helpful presentation. As you say, the private Member's Bill is at a very early Stage. The Committee has helped to start doing some work on it. I do not know when it will hit the Assembly, although I suspect that it will not be before the summer recess. We will see what happens in the next session.

I thank you both, Diane and Rosie, for coming along today. I appreciate it. I will ask the Clerks to e-mail you a copy of the Hansard report for your records. Thank you very much in the meantime. We may call on you again.

Chief Inspector Pennington: Thank you.